

A look back: 32 years of N-C ups and downs

By Ray Barrington, The News-Chronicle - Friday, June 3, 2005

The Green Bay News- Chronicle is printing one more obituary today — its own.

The News-Chronicle, dead at 32, survived by its sister and stepsister newspapers. Remains on view in a red coin box near you — at least for 24 hours. Private burial in the bottom of a birdcage someplace.

Such, of course, is the fate of all newspapers; it's a disposable medium. That, to those who work in them, is part of their charm. We may write something that is remembered, but there's always a deadline the next day. We may botch something royally, but like a baseball player making an error, we have a chance to do something memorable the next day to make people forget it.

There's always the next issue. Until today.

Volume 33, No. 175 marks the end of the line for a newspaper that was formed in strife and never seemed to lose that background. It was never the newspaper it could have been, but it was more than it had any right to be.

THE BEGINNING

It started, of course, as a strike gesture.

In the early 1970s, the great issue in newspapering was the switch from traditional "hot metal" typesetting to computerized phototypesetting. That meant fewer jobs — skilled ones — and unions fought back. There were strikes around the country. In Green Bay, the strike by the local of the International Typographical Union in 1972 was typical. There were 42 workers out on strike. In an attempt to bring in some money and promote their cause, they started a newspaper.

Strike newspapers are nothing new. In Madison, the "Press Connection" operated during a strike against Madison Newspapers Inc. and was well received. But most die quickly, either because the strike ends or the money runs out.

And the only other attempt to start a new newspaper in Wisconsin in recent years, "The Paper" in Oshkosh, had failed despite good quality and the Miles Kimball money behind it.

But the Green Bay union gave it a try. On Nov. 13, 1972, The Daily News made its appearance. Like the Press-Gazette, it was a broadsheet, appeared in the afternoons, and was heavy on wire copy (United Press International) with features the P-G hadn't purchased (Dear Abby was there, then as now, as was the original Heloise).

The strikers had rounded up "anyone who could hold a pen," as one early reporter put it. Christian Heide was the first editor. He left quickly, and others followed. Tom Brooker, editor in 1976-77 and again today, said he couldn't remember how many had come before him, but there were at least five. (The current count is 10 or 11, depending on whether, like Grover Cleveland, you count Brooker twice.)

The paper started at a small building on Thrush Street, but added an office on Broadway in time for the first issue. There was no press; the paper was printed at the Shawano Leader for the first year before being moved in October 1973 to the presses of Brown County Publishing in Denmark. With the move, the Daily News switched to morning publication.

Nobody had really expected the paper to continue for that long. One reason it stayed alive was the support of one of the area's richest men, Victor McCormick. A couple of indications of his clout in Green Bay: it was his name that graced the old Vic Theater (now the Meyer) and space was found in his Minahan-McCormick building for the paper's offices.

His biggest contribution, one year after the paper started, was buying 80 percent of the stock of the newspaper and buying a press in 1975, allowing the Daily News to be printed in Green Bay (at the old Vocational School, now the Green Bay School District head-headquarters).

Why? Nobody really knew. One report said he was angry at the Press-Gazette for unflattering reporting of

his personal life, even though he had ties to the Minahan family ownership of the paper at that time. He would provide the Daily News with a slogan for its editorial page for many years: "Lead, Follow or Get Out of the Way."

McCormick stayed active until 1976, when he was hospitalized with a heart attack and his family sold his interest.

THE WOOD ERA BEGINS

But along with the continuing losses were coming new problems. The Press-Gazette was suing because the Daily News had won the contract to print official city notices. Then, the Daily News started a free shopper, taking on the Brown County Chronicle of BCP and Frank A. Wood. The costs were higher than the Daily News expected, and even McCormick wasn't ready to subsidize that much. Wood, meanwhile, was still owed money for the Daily News' use of its presses, and was considering his own lawsuit.

The solution was a settlement. Wood and BCP bought 45 percent of the stock in Metropolitan Newspaper Corp., with Minahan holding 45 percent and the original stockholders the rest.

It didn't sit well with some of the original staff, who felt having to sell the paper had shown they had lost their battle. Wood, for his part, took a leave of absence from his teaching duties at St. Norbert College and worked late into the night to keep his new paper going.

The takeover brought two major changes. Wood folded his Chronicle shopper into the daily, renaming the paper The News- Chronicle. (Also coming along in the deal was the artwork of a former WBAY-TV staffer who did cartoons for the Chronicle: Lyle Lahey.)

And the paper switched to tabloid size, unusual outside of big cities but easier to handle. For many readers, it was — and remained to the end — a big selling point.

Wood moved printing back to Denmark. He also started to grow a beard, saying he would not shave until the paper turned a break-even month. It took 21 months and a 13-inch beard that Santa would envy before there was a profit of \$125.81, in November 1977.

Another change came in 1982, when The News-Chronicle moved into what would become its trademark building, a former convent at 133 S. Monroe St. However, the printing (and copy desks) were kept in Denmark until the paper's last year.

The losses continued, but seemed to be diminishing as the newspaper got a foothold. The paper's peers were noticing; The News-Chronicle started to win awards in the Wisconsin Newspaper Association's annual contest for the quality of its writing and photography.

And it showed on the bottom line. There were small profits in 1984 and 1985. An article in Editor and Publisher, the national newspaper trade magazine, in 1986 noted the newspaper's new profitability and its willingness to take different stances.

HAPPY CATS, SCOWLING DUCKS

The News-Chronicle seemed to have established itself as part of Green Bay. It had clear niches: coverage of local government, high school sports, even bowling.

It even had its own mascot, a Lahey-drawn cat who appeared in house advertising and on forms.

But one thing the paper didn't have was a large staff, and that sometimes caused problems. Stories that needed a second reading sometimes barely got a first.

The ultimate came in the late 1970s, shortly after the paper got new computers. A sportswriter had rewritten a press release about a meeting of the waterfowl preservation group Ducks Unlimited. While practicing on the new equipment, he typed in a paragraph as a joke for the editor who would read it.

If you can find a News-Chronicle staffer, they can tell you the paragraph. Suffice to say it suggested the group's only accomplishment had been "messing up the landscape" with "a lot of (adjective deleted) duck (leavings)."

Instead of "delete," he hit "send."

Brooker said he got a call from Wood the next morning, and the publisher ordered his editor to read the story. Aloud.

"And all they've accomplished is to mess up the ... oh, sweet mother of God!" Brooker said.

"Exactly," Wood replied.

To this day, the issue remains the only one ever to sell out completely. By 9 a.m.

The folks at Ducks Unlimited, bless them, were able to laugh. The writer got a week's suspension (would have been longer, but he was needed), and the paper managed to make duck salad out of duck leavings.

Lahey, never missing a trick, had his cartoon ready: a duck, in hipboots and a scowl, picketing the building which carried the motto: "The News-Chronicle: The Friend of the Duck."

Which the folks at Ducks Unlimited commissioned for table centerpieces at their next dinner.

There would be others.

A headline: "Homicide suspect napped here."

A thief being arraigned at St. Francis Xavier Cathedral.

The occasional wrong team winning in a headline.

None, of course, were funny at the time. Well, maybe the one about the duck.

ALWAYS THERE

The News-Chronicle would miss only one day of publication in its history. That took place with the issue of Nov. 2, 1985, better known in Green Bay as the day after the "Snow Bowl" game between the Packers and Tampa Bay. An 18-inch windblown snow-fall not only kept game attendance down, it eventually closed Interstate 43 and County R, keeping staff members from getting to Denmark to print the paper.

On some other occasions, deliveries were delayed by power failures or weather, but there was a paper printed. The latest would come in the next-to-last week of The N-C's existence, when a cable between Green Bay and the Gannett presses in Appleton was accidentally cut, hampering both The News-Chronicle and Press-Gazette.

ATTACK OF THE BIG BOYS

The story broke in The News-Chronicle in early 1980: an outside entity was interested in the Green Bay Press-Gazette.

Enterprising reporters were on hand at Austin Straubel International Airport to greet representatives of the Gannett newspaper group when they flew to Green Bay. Soon, it was confirmed: Gannett would buy the PG and its sister paper, the Wausau Record Herald.

The atmosphere had changed. Instead of fighting another locally owned newspaper, The News-Chronicle's competition had deep, deep pockets. And they weren't afraid to dip into them, keeping staffing levels high and ad prices low.

While The News-Chronicle had been profitable in the mid-1980s, the status soon changed. And Wood thought his competition wasn't playing fair. So in 1988, he called a friend, Richard McCord, who had exposed unsavory practices by Gannett aimed against other newspapers. McCord, reluctantly, came to Green Bay.

He worked quietly, with no hint to staff members below the top levels of what he was doing. In his book, "The Chain Gang," McCord would spend a lot of time describing his loneliness as the hired-gun reporter. But his report would be a shocker. Prior to Nov. 27, 1989, ads trumpeted, "this newspaper will make the biggest

announcement in its history."

It was the first of a 10-part series, "It's Now or Never," that detailed the operations of The News-Chronicle and accusations of attacks against it by Gannett. Photos showed the staff, arms folded in determination. The title phrase ran as a banner across the bottom of the front page for almost a year.

It worked — for a while. But it worked too well. The undersized circulation staff couldn't keep up with demand, and many of the subscriptions sold were not renewed for poor delivery.

Still, it had bought time. The paper went into the 1990s under editor Ron Poppenhagen as a consistent award-winner and solid second voice.

THE SHOPPERS

As noted, "shoppers" — the free papers that generally consist of nothing but advertising — have played a key role in keeping The N-C alive. They've gone under various names, but usually had one thing in common — they gave a little extra value.

In the late 1980s, The News-Chronicle even turned a shopper into its first "Sunday" paper. "News-Chronicle Sunday" actually came out on Saturdays, and included breaking news and sports that had been part of the Saturday daily (which was a serious money-loser). The name was eventually switched to "Weekend Edition," then back to the "Brown County Chronicle."

They carried a variety of unusual copy, including food tips from a well-known area chef, Andy Mueller, and an outdoors column by author Mitch Bent that often avoided the "my day of hunting/fishing" style for looks at the politics of conservation.

In recent years, the shoppers were given new identities as the "Community News" and "Journal Shopper" in De Pere. Those publications were transformed in May into the "Community Snapshots" publication distributed by the Press-Gazette.

THE 1990S: A NEW LOOK

In 1992, the paper marked its 20th anniversary with a large special section saluting the past and looking forward to the future. The annual sections ran until last year, often with special themes. (In 2002, for the 30th anniversary, "30 people who care" were profiled.)

In the early 1990s, the paper changed its design several times, with new headline styles, a switch putting sports on the back page, and new nameplates.

By 1995, the presses in Denmark had been upgraded, and color photography on the front became a regular feature.

The biggest change came in 1997, when Wood pledged new support for the paper. A major redesign added daily color to the front. New local columnists from the community gave the editorial page a new zing. The staff was at its largest in years.

The paper was promoting itself more. A trade-off with WLUK-TV brought its meteorologist, John Chandik, to the printed page. New sections were added, from real estate to employment.

Old sections were dressed up. The entertainment section, which had gone by such names as "TGIF," "Bay Beat" and "Friday to Friday," was relaunched as the colorful "Rave!"

And the paper added a new outlet: the Internet. Opened in 1996, greenbaynewschron.com became an immediate hit, due in part to fortuitous timing. That year, the Green Bay Packers made their first trip to the Super Bowl in 30 years, and what had been planned as a weekly update quickly turned daily, to the joy of online football fans.

The Web site was the first for a Green Bay newspaper, and was often competitive with those covering the Packers in other cities. Gradually, it became a full-service site with a variety of features on health, employment and other areas.

In 1997, the paper finally dropped United Press International, which was fading into oblivion, for the Associated Press wire. The N-C had carried the New York Times service for many years; it added the Los Angeles Times-Washington Post wire and the Christian Science Monitor news service. And in November 1998, the paper spent \$180,000 on new editorial equipment, its first in 10 years.

But several outside forces conspired to end the hopes for a resurgence. The price of newsprint, the paper newspapers are printed on, skyrocketed. Staff members left and were not replaced

SOME HISTORIC ISSUES

The News-Chronicle has printed three "extras" in its 32 years. All came after the year 2000.

The first came on a date seared into the national memory: Sept. 11, 2001. Staff members were quickly sent out to get local reaction and find out what was being done against this sudden threat. Copy editors grabbed everything they could off the wire. By 3:30 p.m., a section, with the headline "Day of terror," was being sold on the streets of Green Bay; it would be included in the next day's regular paper (which had even more coverage).

The third helped The News-Chronicle avoid a problem it had in 2000. On that election night, like many other broadcast and print outlets, The N-C struggled to keep up with the changing returns in the Al Gore George W. Bush presidential race. Finally, at about 2 a.m., Florida seemed to have gone to the Republicans, and the front page with the big headline "IT'S BUSH" went to the press.

By the time everyone got home, the headline was, as a former presidential press secretary used to say, "inoperative." It wasn't until weeks later The N-C and everybody else learned that yes, it was Bush.

In 2004, under new management, the press time was less flexible, and The N-C a with a headline showing the race was undecided. But this time, a second edition was printed in early afternoon showing that, indeed, the president had kept his job. (It also provided more complete totals on statewide and local races.)

The third extra came on July 23, 2004, and is part of the final chapter.

ENTER SUNDAYS

It was clear that something would have to happen. Soon after the events of 9-11, the economy, already in a slump, was getting worse. Healthy newspapers were cutting back. The News-Chronicle was not healthy.

More to the point, the paper was losing its lifeline. Brown County Publishing had been able to keep The N-C going with transfusions from its other areas, notably commercial printing. But that market had changed. It was barely profitable, and many of the long-time customers BCP had cultivated with fast turnarounds, quality effort and a "do everything we can" attitude were going solely on price.

In addition, the consolidation of businesses into larger businesses, and the continuing growth of franchises and chain stores were eating at both commercial printing and newspapers. Why should a Wal-Mart advertise in every newspaper when all it had to do was keep telling consumers on television that it had the lowest prices?

And as the smaller of the two dailies, The News-Chronicle was an extra buy. It couldn't offer group sales to big regional and national chains. Car dealers found it useful, and the Oneida Casino was a regular on the entertainment pages. But fewer and fewer others followed.

Attempts were made to stem the tide. In 2002, The News-Chronicle struck a deal with the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. The N-C would start a Sunday edition. It would be available as part of the Sunday Journal Sentinel.

The move boosted circulation, despite complaints from some subscribers that they did not want to pay more for the Milwaukee paper. Eventually, the Journal Sentinel cut back its circulation in Northeast Wisconsin, and the Sunday N-C became as much of a stand-alone paper as an insert in the larger edition.

In addition, a new publication was started. "This Week" was to be an insert in all BCP paid publications, from Sturgeon Bay to Denmark, handled by The News-Chronicle but pulling stories from all of them.

But with the cutbacks, things got worse in the newsroom. Staffers left for other jobs, and weren't replaced. The news staff was down to 10, including two copy editors, a photographer, features editor, news editor, reporter, two sports reporters, weekend photographer/clerical person and another clerical person. And that was all.

It was clear that something had to be done, or The News-Chronicle was going to go, and maybe take all of Brown County Publishing with it.

Some people thought the Sunday deal might lead the Journal Sentinel to buy The News-Chronicle. That wasn't to happen.

THE PURCHASE

What did happen was, as one observer suggested, the Green Bay equivalent of President Bush hiring Osama bin Laden for a Cabinet post.

In late July, staff members at all Brown County Publishing sites were told to report to Green Bay for a 9:30 a.m. meeting at the Holiday Inn City Centre. Rumors were flying. Not even Brooker, an officer of the company, knew what was going on until 36 hours before the announcement.

Crowded into a ballroom, they saw an emotional Frank Wood and an unknown woman enter.

Wood, in his typical style, was blunt. "I've sold the whole works to Gannett," he said.

There was nervous laughter. "I'm not joking," he emphasized, to a gasp — and maybe a few boos.

Gradually, the woman — Gannett's Ellen Leifeld — and Wood answered the questions. Everybody still had a job. All papers were still operating, including The N-C. No pay change, no title change. They were now on new insurance, but that would be worked out.

And The News-Chronicle staff went back to work to put out its extra — the first paper since 1974 not under the direction of Frank Wood.

Wood had realized the problems with the company would leave major issues for his heirs to sort out should he die. And in Leifeld, he had found something he probably thought he never would — a Gannett person who was willing to keep his newsprint children alive.

THE FINAL MONTHS

A casual observer would have seen few changes a month after Gannett took over The News-Chronicle. The staff was the same; in fact, an extra copy editor was about to be hired to help meet new deadlines.

The printing was about to be moved to Gannett's state-of-the-art Appleton facility, and there would be more color throughout.

But some of the people were starting to leave. Distribution was now being handled by the Press-Gazette. The deadline was moved up on Saturday nights because of so many Sunday papers being printed for other publications.

Gannett concentrated on the business end of the acquisition, and left The News-Chronicle news and editorial staffs alone to cover the busy election year and its aftermath.

But it was clear advertising was getting thinner. The paper's deficits were not shrinking, but growing.

And in early May, the decision was made. The blood had almost run out.

The announcement — nowhere near the surprise of the previous year's sale — was made in The News-Chronicle's conference room on May 26. All but four of the 35 or so staff members left were offered jobs at nearby Gannett publications.

Some staff members — mostly in advertising — would leave the next day. A few would stay to put out the final week's papers.

And on June 3 — today — they would put out one last Green Bay News-Chronicle.